

“The Role of Expatriate Christian Missionaries in Contemporary East Africa”

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I had spent four months in East Africa before this summer and conducted research for months pertaining to my topic I proposed to study this summer. I thought I knew the situation, and I figured that I had considered most issues pertaining to the role for Westerners in the contemporary East African Christianity. Though this extensive preparation was the single largest factor in making my summer of research a success, I was blown away often for having never even considered certain perspectives on different issues related to my thesis. And that’s exactly the point. I could have written a thesis in theology on the role of expatriates in the East African Church, even if I had not spent ten weeks this summer in Tanzania and Uganda conducting interviews and getting to know Christians there from all sorts of different viewpoints. Yet, such a paper researched entirely from South Bend would not even begin to compare to the paper I plan to write this year because of the different ideas to which I was exposed, the myriad people I met, and the way in which my topic is no longer something purely theoretical but something I have internalized and become passionate about. This summer, made possible by grant money from the Kellogg Institute, was absolutely crucial to my understanding of the situation on the ground and will be invaluable as I write my senior honors theology thesis this year.

As I review the proposal I wrote last spring to receive grants for this summer’s experience, I can’t help but notice how different such a proposal is from what I would write now. It’s not that I was noticeably misguided previously, but my proposal is evidence to me that I had not internalized many of the questions I was hoping to research. I could read about such issues in journal articles and even discuss them with my advisor, but my perspective is now

fundamentally altered. Rather than merely theorizing about the role of expatriates in the Church, I can think back to all of the different priests, sisters, and others I actually met and the conversations I had with them about their lives. For example, one of the key issues I'm interested in concerns the effect a missionary has on the people he serves and whether he leads to their empowerment. Rather than merely thinking about such a concept in the abstract, however, I can think back to my experience of getting to know Pastor Hafermann and think about how he leads to empowerment and how his example can serve as a guide.

Further reflecting on my initial proposal, I can't help but notice how many of my ideas were confirmed and articulated by a number of people on the ground. At the same time, it is evident to me that I simply knew a lot less about my topic at the time of my proposal writing than I do now, but I guess that is exactly what should happen in that it shows I have learned something this summer. Though I don't have the answers to all of my previous questions (and was even told such things as, "You know, Michael, I have been here for fifteen years and have asked many of the same things, and I still don't know the answers"), I at least have more questions and am excited about exploring these throughout the year in my senior thesis. Additionally, much of what I discovered on the ground was completely different from some of my previous expectations. During my program in development studies in Uganda, I read much from people who wanted to get rid of most Western aid workers, and I also read extensively about the "moratorium" on Christian missionaries called for by many African clergy in the 1970's. Because of this, for example, I expected quite a few East Africans to believe that all missionaries should leave, which is something I simply didn't find at all. Instead, I heard from people who were able to describe the social situation at the time that led to such a call for

moratorium and who also noted how the role missionaries play needs to be different than their initial responsibility but that they certainly still need to be there.

Additionally, in reading through my proposal, I realize that I had not recognized the importance of simply building relationships with those people whose very lives are related to what it is I'm studying. I had previously emphasized interviews and literary research, and though the interviews brought up many different ideas that will be crucial to the success of my thesis this year, and though I will primarily utilize literary research during this academic year, these weren't my only foci this summer. I had not recognized how important building friendships with Westerners who have been in East Africa for 40 years, local Ugandan clergy who have been around Western missionaries at different stages throughout their lives, and many others would be. Oftentimes, I didn't explicitly discuss theology with them, yet their lives provided me with the context for which I can actually study the theology. It's pretty incredible to think back and realize that I made friends with people from their early 20's to their early 70's, from Tanzania and Uganda but also the U.S., Germany, India, and South Korea.

More than anything, this summer provided me with an incredible educational experience. In fact, it is now a difficult adjustment to be back in lecture classes in that I was in such a different learning environment. I made all of my contacts, set up interviews, and then was able to have personal discussions with people who have written books on mission and others who simply drew on their personal experience. A number of evenings, as I reflected on my day, I sat back and thought, "Wow, that was incredible." For example, I may have had three different interviews in three different parts of the city with a local diocesan priest, a priest from the States, and then a pair of Orthodox lay missionaries. Moreover, I was able to be a part of a true conversation with these people, constantly proposing ideas and going back and forth with them.

Though I feel I receive an incredible education at Notre Dame, I have never felt I have played such an active role in my own learning, which was a profoundly powerful experience. This summer has led me to further reflect on later graduate studies and the excitement I receive at the prospect of contributing to a larger body of knowledge.

Despite the overwhelmingly positive experience this summer, there were certainly challenges throughout my ten weeks in East Africa. Though I shouldn't have been too surprised by the frustrations I experienced in that I had been to Uganda before, still, things just don't work the same way. At first, I was surprised when people would not get back to me or when it would take me so long to get places by public transportation, but such things come with the territory. I learned to anticipate the unexpected and for contacts to fall through from time to time. By the second week, I was so thankful I was going to be in the region for almost the entire summer rather than a few weeks in that things take time and one can't be on the same schedule of a student at Notre Dame. At college, if I need to finish a paper, it may not always be pleasant, but I can always sit down, plug away, and it will get done. Things this summer didn't work the same way. Even when I sincerely *wanted* to be talking with all these great people who would blow me away with their insight, it just wasn't happening at first. During the first week, I called and emailed so many people and walked all over the city to try to meet with others; despite this effort, however, I wasn't seeing many results from it. People were sick or out of town, and I didn't know as many people at that point. By the second week, I was experiencing the fruits of my labor and meeting with many people as a result of the work I did at the beginning, but it was necessary to first go through that initial period of frustration. Additionally, never having previously visited Tanzania made conducting research in the country more difficult. Though I was connected with a number of people who I could have interviewed, when those contacts fell

through for different reasons, I did not have the same sort of network of people I knew and could rely on in Uganda, after studying there for a semester.

Despite these challenges, this summer was an incredible experience for me personally and academically, and though I am now getting wrapped up in the hectic life of a Notre Dame student again, my experience from this summer will continue to shape both my senior year and my life beyond. I will work extensively with Fr. Paul Kollman, CSC, on my senior honors theology thesis on the role for expatriates in the contemporary East African Catholic Church, and my interviews and relationships from this summer will constantly shape how and what I research and write. This thesis, to be completed in April of this year, will be the culmination of my undergraduate academic experience in many regards.